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I

A MIDSUMMER freshet was running over old Gabe Bunch's waterwheel into the Cumberland. Inside the mill Steve Marcum lay in one dark corner with a slouched hat over his face. The boy Isom was emptying a sack of corn into the hopper. Old Gabe was speaking his mind.

Always the miller had been a man of peace; and there was one time when he thought the old Stetson-Lewallen feud was done. That was when Rome Stetson, the last but one of his name, and Jasper Lewallen, the last but one of his, put their guns down and fought with bare fists on a high

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ledge above old Gabe's mill one morning at daybreak. The man who was beaten was to leave the mountains; the other was to stay at home and have peace. Steve Marcum, a Stetson, heard the sworn terms and saw the fight. Jasper was fairly whipped; and when Rome let him up he proved treacherous and ran for his gun. Rome ran too, but stumbled and fell. Jasper whirled with his Winchester and was about to kill Rome where he lay, when a bullet came from somewhere and dropped him back to the ledge again. Both Steve Marcum and Rome Stetson said they had not fired the shot; neither would say who had. Some thought one man was lying, some thought the other was, and Jasper's death lay between the two. State troops came then, under the Governor's order, from the Blue Grass, and Rome had to

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drift down the river one night in old Gabe's canoe and on out of the mountains for good. Martha Lewallen, who, though Jasper's sister, and the last of the name, loved and believed Rome, went with him. Marcums and Braytons who had taken sides in the fight hid in the bushes around Hazlan, or climbed over into Virginia. A railroad started up the Cumberland. "Furriners" came in to buy wild lands and get out timber. Civilization began to press over the mountains and down on Hazlan, as it had pressed in on Breathitt, the seat of another feud, in another county. In Breathitt the feud was long past, and with good reason old Gabe thought that it was done in Hazlan.

But that autumn a panic started over from England. It stopped the railroad far down the Cumberland; it sent the "furri-

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ners" home, and drove civilization back. Marcums and Braytons came in from hiding, and drifted one by one to the old fighting-ground. In time they took up the old quarrel, and with Steve Marcum and Steve Brayton as leaders, the old Stetson-Lewallen feud went on, though but one soul was left in the mountains of either name. That was Isom, a pale little fellow whom Rome had left in old Gabe's care; and he, though a Stetson and a half-brother to Rome, was not counted, because he was only a boy and a foundling, and because his ways were queer.

There was no open rupture, no organized division—that might happen no more. The mischief was individual now, and ambushing was more common. Certain men were looking for each other, and it was a question of "drawin' quick 'n' shootin'

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quick" when the two met by accident, or of getting the advantage "from the bresh."

In time Steve Marcum had come face to face with old Steve Brayton in Hazlan, and the two Steves, as they were known, drew promptly. Marcum was in the dust when the smoke cleared away; and now, after three months in bed, he was just out again. He had come down to the mill to see Isom. This was the miller's first chance for remonstrance, and, as usual, he began to lay it down that every man who had taken a human life must sooner or later pay for it with his own. It was an old story to Isom, and, with a shake of impatience, he turned out the door of the mill, and left old Gabe droning on under his dusty hat to Steve, who, being heavy with moonshine, dropped asleep.

Outside the sun was warm, the flood was

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calling from the dam, and the boy's petulance was gone at once. For a moment he stood on the rude platform watching the tide; then he let one bare foot into the water, and, with a shiver of delight, dropped from the boards. In a moment his clothes were on the ground behind a laurel thicket, and his slim white body was flashing like a faun through the reeds and bushes up stream. A hundred yards away the creek made a great loop about a wet thicket of pine and rhododendron, and he turned across the bushy neck. Creeping through the gnarled bodies of rhododendron, he dropped suddenly behind the pine, and lay flat in the black earth. Ten yards through the dusk before him was the half-bent figure of a man letting an old army haversack slip from one shoulder; and Isom watched him hide it with a rifle under

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a bush, and go noiselessly on towards the road. It was Crump, Eli Crump, who had been a spy for the Lewallens in the old feud and who was spying now for old Steve Brayton. It was the second time Isom had seen him lurking about, and the boy's impulse was to hurry back to the mill. But it was still peace, and without his gun Crump was not dangerous; so Isom rose and ran on, and, splashing into the angry little stream, shot away like a roll of birch bark through the tawny crest of a big wave. He had done the feat a hundred times; he knew every rock and eddy in flood-time, and he floated through them and slipped like an eel into the mill-pond. Old Gabe was waiting for him.

"Whut ye mean, boy," he said, sharply, "reskin' the fever an' ager this way? No wonder folks thinks ye air half crazy. Git

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inter them clothes now 'n' come in hyeh. You'll ketch yer death o' cold swimmin' this way atter a fresh."

The boy was shivering when he took his seat at the funnel, but he did not mind that; some day he meant to swim over that dam. Steve still lay motionless in the corner near him, and Isom lifted the slouched hat and began tickling his lips with a straw. Steve was beyond the point of tickling, and Isom dropped the hat back and turned to tell the miller what he had seen in the thicket. The dim interior darkened just then, and Crump stood in the door. Old Gabe stared hard at him without a word of welcome, but Crump shuffled to a chair unasked, and sat like a toad astride it, with his knees close up under his arms, and his wizened face in his hands. Meeting Isom's angry glance, he shifted his own uneasily.

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"Seed the new preacher comin' 'long to-day?" he asked. Drawing one dirty finger across his forehead, "Got a long scar 'cross hyeh."

The miller shook his head.

"Well, he's a-comin'. I've been waitin' fer him up the road, but I reckon I got to git 'cross the river purty soon now."

Crump had been living over in Breathitt since the old feud. He had been "convicted" over there by Sherd Raines, a preacher from the Jellico Hills, and he had grown pious. Indeed, he had been trailing after Raines from place to place, and he was following the circuit-rider now to the scene of his own deviltry—Hazlan.

"Reckon you folks don't know I got the cirkit-rider to come over hyeh, do ye?" he went on. "Ef he can't preach! Well, I'd tell a man! He kin jus' draw the heart

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out'n a holler log! He 'convicted' me fust night, over thar in Breathitt. He come up thar, ye know, to stop the feud, he said; 'n' thar was laughin' from one eend o' Breathitt to t'other; but thar was the whoppinest crowd thar I ever see when he did come. The meetin'-house wasn't big enough to hold 'em, so he goes out on the aidge o' town, 'n' climbs on to a stump. He hed a woman with him from the settle-mints—she's a-waitin' at Hazlan fer him now—'n' she had a cur'us little box, 'n' he put her 'n' the box on a big rock, 'n' started in a callin' 'em his bretherin' 'n' sisteren, 'n' folks seed mighty soon thet he meant it, too. He's always mighty easylike, tell he gits to the blood-penalty."

At the word, Crump's listeners paid sudden heed. Old Gabe's knife stopped short in the heart of the stick he was whittling;

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the boy looked sharply up from the running meal into Crump's face and sat still.

"Well, he jes prayed to the Almighty as though he was a-talkin' to him face to face, 'n' then the woman put her hands on that box, 'n' the sweetes' sound anybody thar ever heerd come outen it. Then she got to singin'. Hit wusn't nuthin' anybody thar'd ever heerd; but some o' the women folks was a sniffin' 'fore she got through. He pitched right into the feud, as he calls hit, 'n' the sin o' sheddin' human blood, I tell ye; 'n' 'twixt him and the soldiers I reckon thar won't be no more fightin' in Breathitt. He says, 'n' he always says it mighty loud"—Crump raised his own voice—"thet the man as kills his feller-critter hev some day got ter give up his own blood, sartin 'n' shore."

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It was old Gabe's pet theory, and he was nodding approval. The boy's parted lips shook with a spasm of fear, and were as quickly shut tight with suspicion. Steve raised his head as though he too had heard the voice, and looked stupidly about him.

"I tol' him," Crump went on, "thet things was already a-gettin' kind o' frolicsome round hyeh agin; thet the Marcums 'n' Braytons was a-takin' up the ole war, 'n' would be a-plunkin' one 'nother every time they got together, 'n' a-gittin' the whole country in fear 'n' tremblin'—now thet Steve Marcum had come back."

Steve began to scowl and a vixenish smile hovered at Isom's lips.

"He knows mighty well—fer I tol' him—thet thar hain't a wuss man in all these mountains than thet very Steve—" The name ended in a gasp, and the wizened

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gossip was caught by the throat and tossed, chair and all, into a corner of the mill.

"None o' that, Steve!" called the miller, sternly. "Not hyeh. Don't hurt him now!"

Crump's face stiffened with such terror that Steve broke into a laugh.

"Well, ye air a skeery critter!" he said, contemptuously. "I hain't goin' to hurt him, Uncl' Gabe, but he must be a plumb idgit, a-talkin' 'bout folks to thar face, 'n' him so puny an' spindlin'! You git!"

Crump picked himself up trembling—"Don't ye ever let me see ye on this side o' the river agin, now"—and shuffled out, giving Marcum one look of fear and unearthly hate.

"Convicted!" snorted Steve. "I heerd old Steve Brayton had hired him to layway me, 'n' I swar I believe hit's so."

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"Well, he won't hev to give him more'n a chaw o' tobaccer now," said Gabe. "He'll come purty near doin' hit hisself, I reckon, ef he gits the chance."

"Well, he kin git the chance ef I gits my leetle account settled with ole Steve Brayton fust. 'Pears like that old hog ain't satisfied shootin' me hisself." Stretching his arms with a yawn, Steve winked at Isom and moved to the door. The boy followed him outside.

"We're goin' fer ole Brayton about the dark o' the next moon, boy," he said. "He's sort o' s'picious now, 'n' we'll give him a leetle time to git tame. I'll have a bran'-new Winchester fer ye, Isom. Hit ull be like ole times agin, when Rome was hyeh. Whut's the matter, boy?" he asked, suddenly. Isom looked unresponsive, listless.

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"Air ye gittin' sick agin?"

"Well, I hain't feelin' much peert, Steve."

"Take keer o' yourself, boy. Don't git sick *now*. We'll have to watch Eli Crump purty close. I don't know why I hain't killed thet spyin' skunk long ago, 'ceptin' I never had a shore an' sartin reason fer doin' it."

Isom started to speak then and stopped. He would learn more first; and he let Steve go on home unwarned.

The two kept silence after Marcum had gone. Isom turned away from old Gabe, and stretched himself out on the platform. He looked troubled. The miller, too, was worried.

"Jus' a hole in the groun'," he said, half to himself; "that's whut we're all comin' to! 'Pears like we mought help one 'nother

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to keep out'n hit, 'stid o' holpin' 'em in."

Brown shadows were interlacing out in the mill-pond, where old Gabe's eyes were intent. A current of cool air had started down the creek to the river. A katydid began to chant. Twilight was coming, and the miller rose.

"Hit's a comfort to know *you* won't be mixed up in all this devilment," he said; and then, as though he had found more light in the gloom: "Hit's a comfort to know the new rider air shorely a-preachin' the right doctrine, 'n' I want ye to go hear him. Blood fer blood—life fer a life! Your grandad shot ole Tom Lewallen in Hazlan. Ole Jack Lewallen shot him from the bresh. Tom Stetson killed ole Jack; ole Jass killed Tom, 'n' so hit comes down, fer back as I can ricollect. I hev

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never knowed hit to fail." The lad had risen on one elbow. His face was pale and uneasy, and he averted it when the miller turned in the door.

"You'd better stay hyeh, son, 'n' finish up the grist. Hit won't take long. Hev ye got victuals fer yer supper?"

Isom nodded, without looking around, and when old Gabe was gone he rose nervously and dropped helplessly back to the floor.

"'Pears like old Gabe knows I killed Jass," he breathed, sullenly. 'Pears like all of 'em knows hit, 'n' air jus' a-torment-in' me."

Nobody dreamed that the boy and his old gun had ended that fight on the cliff; and without knowing it, old Gabe kept the lad in constant torture with his talk of the blood-penalty. But Isom got used to it in

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time, for he had shot to save his brother's life. Steve Marcum treated him thereafter as an equal. Steve's friends, too, changed in manner towards him because Steve had. And now, just when he had reached the point of wondering whether, after all, there might not be one thing that old Gabe did not know, Crump had come along with the miller's story, which he had got from still another, a circuit-rider, who must know the truth. The fact gave him trouble.

"Mebbe hit's goin' to happen when I goes with Steve atter ole Brayton," he mumbled, and he sat thinking the matter over, until a rattle and a whir inside the mill told him that the hopper was empty. He arose to fill it, and coming out again, he heard hoof-beats on the dirt road. A stranger rode around the rhododendrons

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and shouted to him, asking the distance to Hazlan. He took off his hat when Isom answered, to wipe the dust and perspiration from his face, and the boy saw a white scar across his forehead. A little awe-stricken, the lad walked towards him.

"Air you the new rider whut's goin' to preach up to Hazlan?" he asked.

Raines smiled at the solemnity of the little fellow. "Yes," he said, kindly. "Won't you come up and hear me?"

"Yes, sir," he said, and his lips parted as though he wanted to say something else, but Raines did not notice.

"I wished I had axed him," he said, watching the preacher ride away. "Uncle Gabe knows might' nigh ever'thing, 'n' he says so. Crump said the rider said so; but Crump might 'a' been lyin'. He 'most al'ays is. I wished I had axed *him*."

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Mechanically the lad walked along the mill-race, which was made of hewn boards and hollow logs. In every crevice grass hung in thick bunches to the ground or tipped wiry blades over the running water. Tightening a prop where some silvery jet was getting too large, he lifted the tail-gate a trifle and lay down again on the platform near the old wheel. Out in the mill-pond the water would break now and then into ripples about some unwary moth, and the white belly of a fish would flash from the surface. It was the only sharp accent on the air. The chant of the katydids had become a chorus, and the hush of darkness was settling over the steady flow of water and the low drone of the millstones.

"I hain't afeerd," he kept saying to himself. "I hain't afeerd o' nothin' nor nobody," but he lay brooding until his head

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throbbed, until darkness filled the narrow gorge, and the strip of dark blue up through the trees was pointed with faint stars. He was troubled when he rose, and climbed on Rome's horse and rode homeward—so troubled that he turned finally and started back in a gallop for Hazlan.

It was almost as Crump had said. There was no church in Hazlan, and, as in Breathitt, the people had to follow Raines outside the town, and he preached from the roadside. The rider's Master never had a tabernacle more simple: overhead the stars and a low moon; close about, the trees still and heavy with summer; a pine torch over his head like a yellow plume; two tallow dips hung to a beech on one side, and flicking to the other the shadows of the people who sat under them. A few Marcums and Braytons were there, one faction shadowed

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on Raines's right, one on his left. Between them the rider stood straight, and prayed as though talking with some one among the stars. Behind him the voice of the woman at her tiny organ rose among the leaves. And then he spoke as he had prayed; and from the first they listened like children, while in their own homely speech he went on to tell them, just as he would have told children, a story that some of them had never heard before. "Forgive your enemies as He had forgiven his," that was his plea. Marcums and Braytons began to press in from the darkness on each side, forgetting each other as the rest of the people forgot them. And when the story was quite done, Raines stood a full minute without a word. No one was prepared for what followed. Abruptly his voice rose sternly—"Thou shalt not kill";

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and then Satan took shape under the torch. The man was transformed, swaying half crouched before them. The long black hair fell across the white scar, and picture after picture leaped from his tongue with such vividness that a low wail started through the audience, and women sobbed in their bonnets. It was penalty for bloodshed—not in this world: penalty eternal in the next; and one slight figure under the dips staggered suddenly aside into the darkness.

It was Isom; and no soul possessed of devils was ever more torn than his, when he splashed through Troubled Fork and rode away that night. Half a mile on he tried to keep his eyes on his horse's neck, anywhere except on one high gray rock to which they were raised against his will—the peak under which he had killed young

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Jasper. There it was staring into the moon, but watching him as he fled through the woods, shuddering at shadows, dodging branches that caught at him as he passed, and on in a run, until he drew rein and slipped from his saddle at the friendly old mill. There was no terror for him there. There every bush was a friend; every beech trunk a sentinel on guard for him in shining armor.

It was the old struggle that he was starting through that night—the old fight of humanity from savage to Christian; and the lad fought it until, with the birth of his wavering soul, the premonitions of the first dawn came on. The patches of moonlight shifted, paling. The beech columns mottled slowly with gray and brown. A ruddy streak was cleaving the east like a slow sword of fire. The chill air began to pulse

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and the mists to stir. Moisture had gathered on the boy's sleeve. His horse was stamping uneasily, and the lad rose stiffly, his face gray but calm, and started home. At old Gabe's gate he turned in his saddle to look where, under the last sinking star, was once the home of his old enemies. Farther down, under the crest, was old Steve Brayton, alive, and at that moment perhaps asleep.

"Forgive your enemies;" that was the rider's plea. Forgive old Steve, who had mocked him, and had driven Rome from the mountains; who had threatened old Gabe's life, and had shot Steve Marcum almost to death! The lad drew breath quickly, and standing in his stirrups, stretched out his fist, and let it drop, slowly.